



### 'DESTINATIONS' (from 2004)

It was deathly hot, 104 degrees, the day the four of us (Norah, Rose, Olivia and I) arrived at Delicate Arch trailhead to join other parties clustered at their vehicles, gathering cameras and stowing bottles of water, food, who knows, into packs. A ranger was busy with an interview process consisting of a single instruction: "Point to one of these three photos of people in an outdoor setting that comes closest to your impression of the number of people encountered on the walk to Delicate Arch and back." Two kids were climbing on a rocky bank, high and steep, at the edge of the parking lot; scrambling hard and showing neat balance, but one little slip and they'd be in trouble.

I was about to shout and run, but their dad happened to look up from the trunk of his car, saw the situation, called the kids down. We got ourselves organized and took to the trail; wasn't long before we were all feeling the quiet, heavy heat, dry but oppressive. We decided I'd go ahead, find out how much further to the arch. I'd been there before but had, as usual, underestimated the distance. Underestimation, one of my disabilities.

The trail to Delicate Arch is one of the most interesting I've ever followed. Most of it is on solid sandstone, you're placing your feet on bare bastion material of the desert, the actual structure of rock-ribbed



canyon country that is both fantasy and hard-boned reality. One of its stretches is marked with little rock cairns that guide you on a long tilted rock slab. And, just before the arch suddenly reveals itself, there is a neat bit of trail where your right shoulder is close to high wall and your left foot is a few inches from empty space.

I got to the arch a few steps behind a young man who, it turned out, was a citizen of the Czech Republic. He raised his camera immediately, and took a shot. His first focusing on the arch was through the lens. I asked, "Was it worth it?" He turned, in surprise. "What?" "I mean, is it good?" "Of course," again with a shocked tone as though I had cast doubt on a sacred shrine. But my thought was that, busied with camera action, he didn't yet know what was there, sacred or otherwise.

He positioned himself for another shot at the arch, which, by the way, is not delicate. Unlike so many others in canyon country and in the east, Delicate is free-standing. Is that how it got its name? Other viewers arrived. I went back to my party to report. A few minutes later the Czech passed us, in a hurry. We were all in a hurry. Sounds of footsteps on rock struck me as a kind of route march, all of us in the grip of an insistent calling from other places, other views.

Next day, Devils Garden, more arches, each of them special, unique, very satisfying. At Railroad Arch a fully equipped cameraman, tripod and all, was making careful adjustments while talking to a companion. On this day our feet crunched gravel, occasionally sandstone, but the route march insistence was still there, and louder, underfoot gravel being louder than smooth stone. My party discovered a lizard who allowed us to lean over close for a good look, and back at the parking lot another lizard, blue-tailed, skittered under a vehicle, and then we were in the car headed for Dinosaur. I'm not condemning the hurried visitor scene. I'm merely reporting.

No, I take that back, there is one question that has to be asked: why was a ranger at the trailhead recording numbers? It was a single-minded and therefore good-for-nothing, bureaucratic intrusion that would find its way into a report that would be treated as reflecting some kind of reality around which future plans could be forced.

I think it might have been better if the ranger had been sort of in charge of the trailhead, noticing, for example, those two kids caught in dangerous fun. In other words, what trailwalk numbers and reality are we talking about here? Real lives of actual people, from Japan and the Czech Republic and from Germany and France and Canada and Kansas and San Francisco ... the world converging on Arches and the other destination places, such as Alice Springs in mid-Australia where Golden Arches and KFC welcome airborne searchers for ... what?

At Dinosaur, my party's next destination, we are herded by nicely designed signs to a bus that takes us to the awe-inspiring (Rose and Olivia would say "Awesome.") bones. We wander, each of us choosing places of concentration among the wealth of skulls, leg bones, foot bones, ribs, pelvises, vertebrae that supported the immensity of dinosaur life. I feel well-served. Except, for god-sake, a ranger's lecturing voice that captures not only the small group of tourists respectfully standing, listening, being told, but those of us browsing among bones nearly unbelievable and their helpful placards.

There is no escape from it. Call me curmudgeon, I resent the insistent voice-over. My honed-through-the-years sense of being managed has been struck again, this time in the shape of disrespect for us humans, and those bones. Which reminds me of other Visitor Centers: Wild Horse National Recreation Area, Teton National Park, Great Sand Dunes where I have observed citizens sitting obediently in front of screens that show what to see and tell what it all

means; or gathered around a diorama while a ranger instructs and points, raising her voice above the din of adjacent bookstore and info desk and whine of children ... the children, their sulks and rebellions the hope of the future though they are now a disruptive, undisciplined bunch of spoiled brats ....

and then those same people, and I include myself, go out to walk and look, crammed with what to look for and what it all means.

Sometimes we don't walk out; instead we head directly for the cars and the open road, on to the next orientation ... Grand Canyon, Great Smokies, Yellowstone, Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Recreation Area ... so many DESTINATIONS in this great land, such a grand array of CHOICES. One summer, wearing the uniform of a ninety-day-wonder in Teton National Park, my duties included evening slide shows, museum guide and the leading of nature walks. One fine morning my walkers were strung out on a sage-scarlet gilia meadow, the trail leading into lodgepole forest. I happened to be at the drag of the bunch, keeping an eye out for stragglers, having learned the hard way that the top priority of nature walk leadership is to match precisely the initial count with the return count.

Something was happening up ahead, signaled by low-toned words being passed back. My group began spreading into a skirmish line that moved stealthily into the woods. I infiltrated forward. A "creature" had been sighted. Sure enough, there it was, and not just a glimpse and quick disappearance. It was still there, and my nature walkers were dealing with the situation just fine. "Close enough!" "Wait." "Behind the log" "Don't point, just wait." I passed the word, "Marten," and then just waited, amazed.

The marten was cooperating beautifully, impelled by innate curiosity, a survival trait, making short disappearance acts only to pop up somewhere else, and people impelled by that same inborn excitement were guiding each other, aware of every least sound. Aware of their feet. Paying attention. Who was in charge? The marten, I suppose. Perhaps the woman who had first caught sight of "the creature." Certainly it wasn't the guy under the smokey hat, wearing the NPS uniform. My partner, Alison, mentioned last night that National Geographic Specials are okay; you can gather quite a lot of information about giraffes and other creatures great and small, but all of that pales in comparison with your own head-to-head encounter with, say, a Monarch caterpillar.

You watch that caterpillar, you think about it, you're with it. I agreed, remembering nature program voice-overs. Later, we couldn't help but grouse, once again, about experts' voices on TV and radio ... retired generals, academics, think tank people ... telling us what's really happening, what to expect, what it all means. All those VOICES.

Yesterday, a sudden revelation: one of our gardens putting on quite a show in late afternoon light. Tall purple stems of Russian Kale, big leaves in various tones of velvety green and violet to rose to gold-green to pale yellow of end



of summer. The leaves were ravaged by insects but there was enough left for us. Sungold tomato foliage ran rampant, sprawled over this year's hay compost, loaded with orange fruit. Fire red peppers glowed from within the dark leafworks of a tall pepper grown from seed from Guernica, Spain. (Remember the Stukas diving on people?). Turnips and green beans on the north side. We hadn't planned the display, it just happened, though I have to mention the work that made it possible: fighting sod, seeding, composting, watering through dry spells, learning what not to do. Does it take something unexpected to give us a nudge into paying attention to what's really happening, precisely where we stand, or walk? I think so. It's all very well to tell each other to hang loose, look around, let what comes come, but the human will is a mysterious inhabitant. It needs training, or a nudge.

Even Thoreau admits that there are times when he goes outdoors to get free of indoors but his indoor thoughts go with him. My bet is that a bird or a rainstorm or a sudden blaze of blossom, things like that, provided the nudge, got Henry back to "now where my body is." Walking, 1862. Where the body is. One winter, trapping deer mice at Furnace Creek in Death Valley, a sudden snowstorm moved in. I spent a shivery night in a single sleeping bag of the old fashioned square-toed type, not a mummy bag. Crawled out into a cold wind-swept morning, collected the traps, drove out of there with nothing to show for it except one large mouse, *Peromyscus eremicus*, in the back seat, who had, I hoped, made himself a nest in a wad of cotton I'd stuffed into the trap.

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A long cold day followed, piloting a three-shift car in slick snow. Made it out of Death Valley, but got stuck on the pass into Tonopah. A pickup came along, pushed me to the top. Found food and coffee in Tonopah, went on until dark, made camp somewhere south of Carson City. Another bitter night, but not much wind. The moon came up, spreading cold light on brush and snow adding to the misery of almost continual shivering. I did doze, waking often. Once, waking, I sensed something different next to my cold feet. Slight heat radiating from a live body? I didn't know, but something new down there, for sure. I raised the edge of the bag, moonlight flooded in. A kangaroo rat sat on the fabric, perfectly still, looking outward into the desert, but its big black eye must have taken me in too. A few long moments passed, long enough for me to feel a quick gladness: another being, a furry mammal, sharing my shelter. Wonderful furriness! Then it was gone.

I don't remember thinking up theories as to why it had moved in on me. Nor do I try to figure it out now. One could speculate. Go ahead. I'm satisfied to simply recall that gladness that made the desert cold more endurable. Or reasonable? I don't know, it was a happening, on the ground, two bodies.

Can you stay still for one more walk? A pitch black night in Glen Helen, Yellow Springs, Ohio. There had been a lot of palaver in the meeting room, about outdoor education. I had thrown what I judged to be a sizeable stone into the discussion, saying I didn't believe in outdoor education. A hyperbolic statement, inviting discussion, spirited disagreement, anything to break the crust of sanctity. My stone turned out to be a tiny pebble, its ripples dying in a perfect silence. Someone waded in, deftly swerved past the question. I sat back, waited for the meeting to end. Maybe I'd drop in at the Trail Tavern, forget the whole scene. But it wasn't over; there was an announcement of various night time activities.

I chose the nature walk, joined nine or ten people hunched together in the warm Ohio darkness, waiting for our leader who arrived promptly and said, "I'm not going to say a word." He disappeared in the night. We followed, gropingly. Nobody had a flashlight, nobody had a clue. We followed each other in single file, saying not one word, our feet searching for the trail, stumbling over a root occasionally, learning to pick up our feet. We soon fell into the spirit of the thing. How do I know that? Well, one just does.

Language is not confined to the world of words. We felt the uphill slant of the land, the down dips. No owl hooted, there was no thunk of flying squirrel on sycamore trunk, no flutter of a bat. Faint rustlings of leaves, smell of the river-side, river's talking to itself, the suddenly strange sounds of our clothing, and our footsteps. These were the only clues. It was a long walk. Our leader brought us back to our starting place. And disappeared.

*MARTIN MURIE died last January, but thanks to the cooperation and blessings of his family, the best of Martin's work will continue here in The Zephyr.*



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